

multimodal communication

What is a mode? Smell, olfactory perception, and the notion of mode in multimodal mediated theory

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abstract

Moving towards multimodal mediated theory, I propose to define a mode as a system of mediated action that comes about through concrete lower-level actions that social actors take in the world. In order to explain exactly how a mode is a system of mediated action, I turn to a perfume blog and use one blog entry as my starting point. The mode that I primarily focus on in this article is the mode of smell, explicating that the mode of smell is not synonymous with olfactory perception, even though modal development of smell is certainly *partially* dependent upon olfactory perception.

As I am ostensibly focusing on the *one mode*, I once again problematize this notion of countability and delineate the *purely theoretical and heuristic unit of mode* (Norris, 2004). I clarify that modes a) do not exist in the world as they are purely theoretical in nature; b) that modes can be delineated in various ways; and c) that modes are never singular.

Even though the concept of mode is problematical – and in my view needs to always be problematized – I argue that the term and the notion of mode is theoretically useful as it allows us to talk about and better understand communication and (inter)action in three respects: 1. The notion of mode allows us to investigate regularities as residing on a continuum somewhere between the social actor(s) and the mediational means; 2. The theoretical notion of mode embraces socio-cultural and historical as well as individual characteristics, never prioritising any of these and always embracing the tension that exists between social actor(s) and mediational means; and 3. The theoretical notion of mode demonstrates that modal development through concrete lower-level actions taken in the world, is transferable to other lower-level actions taken.

key words

Mode, multimodality, olfactory perception, smell, systems of mediated action



introduction

what is a mode?

Moving towards multimodal mediated theory, I propose to define the term *mode* as a *system of mediated action with regularities*. Thus defined, the concept of *mode* aligns closely with my actual use of the term in multimodal (inter)action analysis growing directly out of the theoretical underpinnings of mediated discourse theory (Scollon, 1998, 2001; Wertsch, 1998). A mode, as shown in Geenen (forthcoming), would not be the only system of mediated action. However, in this article, I am only discussing the conceptualisation of mode as a system of mediated action with regularities. I illustrate that, even though the term and the theoretical concept of mode is a problematical and a necessarily problematizable one, the theoretical notion of mode is useful for the understanding of communication and (inter)action. In order to explicate my theoretical thinking, I shall closely investigate the mode of smell: I show that the mode of smell is not synonymous with olfactory perception, even though the mode of smell is certainly dependent upon olfactory perception.

With the aim of elucidating my definition of the term mode as a system of mediated action with regularities, I take snippets from Olga Rowe's (2012) perfume review as my starting point to discuss the mode of smell in some detail. Thereby, I demonstrate that the definition of a mode as a system of mediated action allows us to gain an understanding of why we find heterogeneity as well as congruity in communication.

an example from a perfume blog

The author begins her narrative in the perfume blog with the sentence:

Every day at my dressing table I take a little breath and a pause before I put perfume on...

(Rowe, 2012)

Reading this, we can imagine a woman sitting at a dressing table, contemplating which perfume may be right for that specific day (or event or time of day). Thus, we can say that the woman, who is sitting at the dressing table, is choosing perfume (as an embedded higher-level action) as, for example, a part of her routine of getting dressed.

A higher-level action (Norris 2004, 2011) is always made up of an abundance of chained lower-level actions – or we can put it the other way and say that an abundance of chained lower-level actions make up any higher-level action – as lower- and higher-level actions constitute each other simultaneously with neither being prior.

Each lower-level action is a mode's smallest meaning unit such as a step for the mode of walking, an utterance for the mode of spoken language, or the sniff for the mode of smell. Each mode can be viewed either as partial, or as overarching and made up of various modes: So that we can say that the mode of walking is part of the mode of physical bodily movement, spoken language is part of the mode of language, and the mode that we can call *smell of perfume fragrance* is part of the mode of smell.

The term mode, as mentioned above, is used purely heuristically and is defined as a system of mediated action with regularities (Norris, forthcoming); whereby systems of mediated action (or modes) are viewed as derived from concrete lower-level actions. What I mean by this is that a mode is learned through lower-level mediated actions taken in the world. Important is that modes, such as the mode *smell of perfume fragrance*, are never used on their own, but always and only in relation to and intertwined with other systems of mediated action (such as object handling and gaze), and always build larger systems of mediated action, such as the mode of smell, or can be delineated into smaller systems of mediated action, such as the mode *smell of flowery perfume fragrance*.

A mediated action (Scollon 1998, 2001; Wertsch 1998) is defined as a social actor acting with or through mediational means. In the blog entry sentence above, it is Olga (the social actor and author of the perfume review) acting through the mediational means of in-breath, pausing, and perfume – as well as her use of the layout and the objects within, which we can imagine without her specifically alluding to them; and her body including her nose, her hands, and her eyes. The mediational means are, as always multiple, some used simultaneously and some consecutively, and all of them created by and creating the higher-level action of Olga choosing her perfume.

olfactory perception

Olfactory perception describes the sensory experience that a social actor gains through the organ nose.

The top notes of the shadowy forest green include champa flower, citron, mastic, a resin, cubeb, a spicy scent...

(Rowe, 2012)

While Guerts (2003) claims that many empiricists suggest that external objects stimulate internal organs and Merleau-Ponty suggests the opposite, namely that perception begins in the body and ends in the object (Guerts 2003: 74); I would like to suggest that neither of these positions is quite right.

Taking the mediated action as unit of analysis, we see that the social actor acts through mediational means (social actor with objects) simultaneously, where neither the social actor's experience nor the object itself giving off data, precedes this (inter)action. Rather than giving social actor or object primacy, the mediated action allows us to illustrate that a constant tension between social actor and object (mediational means) exists.

When I speak of a mode, I am not simply speaking of a social actor's ability to perceive or distinguish odors. The olfactory sense is a biological given for most social actors and builds the basis for a mode to develop. But a mode does not develop without action; a mode develops through the real-time use of the olfactory sense in action. Thus, what I am alluding to here is that a social actor develops a system of mediated action (or mode) through real time actions taken in connection with and through the world and objects within.

Neither social actor, nor the world and the objects take precedence. Rather, they come together, constituting a continuous tension between them, and form the mode (of smell for example).

acquiring a mode

When defining a mode as a system of mediated action, I am claiming that we learn when we act in the world. Take language, for example: a baby acquires the speech that it hears through interaction, turning this speech from what Vygotsky (1978) called an *intermental plane* (between caregiver and baby) *intramentally* (within the baby) into a system that allows the child to create novel utterances. However, I would go a step further and state that the mode never really and never only resides on some kind of an *intramental plane*, but is always intricately intertwined and connected between social actor and world through the tension created by the *social actor/mediational means* unit.

Thus, taking this a bit further, I would like to claim that the baby's experience of verbal interaction facilitates learning of speech and facilitates the creation of a system of mediated action on the *social actor/mediational means plane*. As the child grows and experiences more verbal interaction and more verbal thought, the system of mediated action develops, changes, and expands. It is this kind of system of mediated action, in this case speaking, that I am calling a mode.

When conceptualising the term mode in this way, a mode develops when a social actor, such as the baby above, (inter)acts with other social actors, the environment, and/or objects within. Many real time actions of the same kind (in the example of the baby, speaking/verbal thinking) slowly grows into various practices (of when to say what to whom, for example) and into a system of mediated action (on the *social actor/mediational means plane*).

Systems of mediated actions thus always come about through (inter)action – or through social actor(s) (people) acting with/through mediational means (the environment and/or objects). Such systems of mediated action, just like the mediated actions (the actions taken/experienced in the world) from which they are derived, are always multiple. When a baby is sitting on the floor, playing with blocks, for example, the system of mediated action (or mode) of speaking develops at the very same time as the system of mediated action (or mode) of playing with blocks, the system of mediated action (or mode) of sitting on the floor, and so on. One mode alone never does exist, and the heuristic differentiation of modes only makes analytical sense, offering a lens that allows us to gain further insight into aspects human.

smell: the difference between sense and mode

Smell -- as a sense -- is a biological ability that most humans have; some more and some less. This sense is a biological ability for most social actors, while *the mode of smell* is an acquired system of mediated action that comes about through the use of the sense of smell. Let us now think about a part of the mode of smell (or a smaller mode): the mode *smell of perfume fragrance*.

The heart of the fragrance in addition to floral notes of osmanthus and orchid has a Michaelia alba leaf listed, which I see as a continuation of the wood and forests theme – I am impressed that woody and leafy notes are present on every level of this fragrance's pyramid.

(Rowe, 2012)

The mode I call *smell of perfume fragrance* develops (not unlike the mode of language in the child) through actions taken in the world: A social actor smells perfume once, twice, many times. Many lower-level mediated actions of smelling perfume develop into a system of mediated action with regularities. The regularities in a mode, as also discussed in detail in Norris (forthcoming), reside somewhere on a continuum, and are sometimes more linked to the system as is the case for language, and sometimes more linked to the body as is the case for physical bodily motion. A mode, defined as a system of mediated action, is thus a theoretical concept that binds physical social actors to (more or less) symbolic and/or concrete systems in fundamental ways. As will become clear below in the section 'acquiring a mode,' the mode defined in this way also binds social actors to other social actors, embedding a strong socio-cultural aspect.

However, before moving on to the socio-cultural aspect embedded, I will dwell on the systematic development of a mode in respect to particular social actors. This allows me to explicate the theoretical notion more clearly on the one hand, and it illustrates very well how individual social actors acquire particular systems of mediated action (modes). Each social actor, who has developed the mode *smell of perfume fragrance*, will have a slightly different and/or differently developed system of mediated action. Some people will know that a perfume smells nice or is not for them. Others will know that a perfume smells green or like flowers. While again others will know that a perfume may have a base, overtones, undertones, warmth or coolness, and they will be able to smell the many parts present in the fragrance.

When we go shopping for perfume we can watch as smelling perfume is performed. A particular one-time higher-level action of smelling perfume in a store may consist of several steps from asking for perfume paper, spraying perfume onto the paper, waving the paper a few times back and forth and then *sniffing the paper*, commenting and discussing the tones of the perfume, holding the paper for a few minutes, again *sniffing the paper*, and again

discussing the tones of the perfume. Many of us have engaged in this kind of a higher-level action, and we all may have developed some aspects of the mode *smell of perfume fragrance*. Yet, when reading Olga's perfume review, we find that she is extremely experienced in pin-pointing what she smells, expressing the smallest nuances that many of us are unable to smell (or to name).

On warmer days more floral notes can be smelled in the heart, and I've been having fun trying to sniff out the light hints of honeyed fruitiness of osmanthus or soft floral spiciness of carnation, but the fragrance never becomes obviously floral...

(Rowe, 2012)

What we find is that the mode *smell of perfume fragrance* is made up of much more than the biological sense of smell. The ability to identify and distinguish different smells is learned and the mode *smell of perfume fragrance* is not simply a given. But smelling perfume is based on olfactory perception. Without this sense, a social actor is unable to develop the mode of smell. The mode *smell of perfume fragrance* is also linked – and very closely linked – to the mode of language. In the perfume review, we find that the author has learned how to speak/write about perfume. This, for many of us, is a part of the system of mediated action of language that we have not developed very well.

But first, let us think about the lower-level action for the mode *smell of perfume fragrance*. The lower-level action is the sniff, which turns into a chain of lower level actions, or many sniffs at different times. We all may be able to perform this action. Yet, we will not all be able to smell the various notes in a perfume as Olga can. As said above, many of us will stop with nice or not for us. Others will stop at green or like flowers. Someone, who has a flower garden, may smell the carnations. But many of us will not be able to go much further than that. We have not learned to smell the other parts of a fragrance, so that we often go back to nice or not for us.

Now imagine for a moment that I was sniffing perfume together with Olga. It would be amazing to me – colloquially we would say 'what a fine nose she has developed' – but what it really means is what an incredibly detailed system of mediated action of *smell of perfume fragrance* she has developed. It would be amazing to me how she could smell aspects of a fragrance that I could simply not smell, try as I might.

But, in connection with the system of mediated action of *smell of perfume fragrance*, Olga also has developed a part of her system of mediated action of speaking (and is, so to say, fluent in the practice of speaking about perfume). She could express nuances – many of which I would not be able to smell in the first place – but at the same time, or therefore, could also not possibly express. But it is not simply that we cannot express the other notes. I would like to argue that we actually are incapable of smelling them – at least I am. Many

of us have not developed the system of mediated action (or mode *smell of perfume fragrance*) to the extent that Olga has and therefore, cannot have the same olfactory experience that she has. This means without the system of mediated action *smell of perfume fragrance* as developed as Olga's, we are limited in our ability to perceive and distinguish specific odours. What we find is that the mode *smell of perfume fragrance* is a system of mediated action that many of us have acquired a little, while Olga has acquired the system to an extent that many of us do not even know exists.

Smelling this heart you will never think of a new leather purse with a perfumed handkerchief, but you might start dreaming that you are still walking in the woods...
(Rowe, 2012)

We smell perfume and yet, without having acquired the mode (or system of mediated action) to the extent that Olga has, we are unable to experience the quality and the depth that Olga experiences.

You never leave those dark shadowy woods of passion, but when you get deeper you have some discoveries on the way...
(Rowe, 2012)

Smell of perfume fragrance is thus not a mode that is *out there*, ready to be used by social actors. It is not an affordance or a potential that social actors, if given the opportunity, can simply use, make or remake. *Mode* is (only) a theoretical concept that allows us to think about how we humans do things in this world. Modes do not exist in the world and thus, can also not afford anything other than helping scientists and students to analytically think through very complex situations and practices. What exists in the world are objects such as the perfume fragrance itself. The perfume fragrance itself may have embedded affordances, or carry meaning potentials that social actors can use. But a mode has to be acquired by social actors through concrete lower-level actions taken. The mode *smell of perfume fragrance* has to be acquired one sniff at a time: social actor + mediational means (the perfume fragrance).

Smell of perfume fragrance is also not a mode that exists within the object, within the perfume fragrance. Defining mode as system of mediated action with regularities embeds the tension between social actor and mediational means (in this case the actual perfume fragrance). The mode *smell of perfume fragrance* embeds the tension that comes about between the social actor sniffing the perfume and the perfume fragrance that is being

sniffed. To say this a different way: a social actor can only smell that, which they have learned to smell (the mode of smell), but at the very same time, a social actor can only smell the nuances of the fragrance that are contained in the perfume itself (the mediational means). The mode smell of perfume fragrance is thus neither internal to the social actor (whereas the sense of smell is) nor is the mode smell of perfume fragrance internal to the perfume itself. But so far, I have only discussed a social actor and the mediational means, alluding to the individual nature of modal development, which is only a part of the concept entailed in a mode defined as system of mediated action. Next, I move on to the socio-cultural aspects of a mode.

learning through interaction

Vygotsky (1978) speaks about the intermental and intramental planes to illustrate that social actors learn from others and then internalise what has been learned. The problem with the notion of the intramental plane is that it takes us a bit too far into the cognitive world of a social actor. While the notion of modes certainly does have a cognitive aspect to it, modes are not viewed by any means as purely cognitive, but always as embedding the tension between social actor(s) and mediational means, prioritising neither one nor the other. Keeping this in mind, we can nevertheless use Vygotsky's notions of intermental and intramental for just a moment to explain how socio-cultural learning of the cognitive aspects of a mode might come about.

Vygotsky (1978) hypothesised that learning comes about through the intermental plane between a more experienced social actor and a lesser experienced social actor. When looking at language, for example, we may want to think of a baby acquiring the speech that it hears through interaction, turning this speech from an intermental plane (between caregiver and baby) intramentally into a system that allows the child to create novel utterances. Thus, the experience of verbal interaction facilitates learning of speech and facilitates the creation of aspects of a system of mediated action on the intramental plane. As the child grows and experiences more verbal interaction and more verbal thought, the system of mediated action develops, changes, and expands. When conceptualising the term mode in the way discussed earlier, cognitive aspects of a mode develop when a social actor, such as the baby (inter)acts with other social actors. Other aspects of the mode develop when the baby (inter)acts with the environment and objects within.

But let us return to my story about Olga and myself sniffing perfume together to show how learning a mode such as smell of perfume fragrance is learned: Imagine that Olga smells a perfume and then lets me smell it, asking what I smell and I describe a fragrance as flowers. When she now gives me the terminology soft floral spiciness for that which I sloppily identified as flowers, then I have learned a little part of Olga's system of mediated action we could call speaking about perfume (remembering that systems of mediated action can be defined on various levels). When Olga smells it again and then again lets me smell it, asking if I smell carnation, then she has given me the name and I can sniff and try

to smell carnation (a smell that I am familiar with). If I now do smell carnation in the floral spiciness, then I have learned a little part of Olga's system of mediated action that we can call smelling perfume.

From now on, every time when I smell what Olga has named floral spiciness of carnations, I will be able to smell it as such; and at the very same time, I will be able to name it as such. When, however, I am not quite right in my smelling of the floral spiciness of carnations, yet I am naming a fragrance as such, Olga will, no doubt, correct me. Through such corrections, I will not only learn to smell (and correctly name) that, which she calls floral spiciness of carnations, I will also learn to distinguish this smell (and name) from other similar smells (and different names), thereby learning many different smells (and different names). It is because of this learning of systems of mediated action that there is a commonality in systems of mediated action from one social actor to the other. With this, there is a strong socio-cultural aspect to the concept of mode. We can extrapolate from this little example how people interacting with one another frequently will develop modal similarities and strong overlaps. However, so far, I have limited my discussion primarily to the mode of smell, only once in a while alluding to the mode of spoken (or written) language, or giving the brief example of the baby. While this is useful to introduce my re-theorization of mode, a mode is not learned one (or two) at a time.

no mode is ever used/developed in isolation

an example

In real life, we do not distinguish one mode from another, in real life, modes simply do not exist. But even when examining modes in research, we find that modes are enmeshed in action. Why then, we shall ask, in the notion of modes useful? This is a question that I will answer in the next section, as first, I will illustrate how modes are always multiple in order to gain a better understanding of a) the complexity involved and b) the usefulness of thinking of modes in theoretical terms. Now, let us once again imagine Olga from the perfume blog.

She is sitting at her dressing table, picking up a perfume bottle from her dresser, opening it and holding it closer to her nose, sniffing the surfacing scent. Next, she closes the perfume bottle and places it back on her dresser. Now, she picks up a different perfume bottle, opens it and holds it closer to her nose, again, sniffing the emergent scent. Each time Olga picks up a perfume bottle, sniffs it, and places it back on the table, she performs a higher-level action. Each of these higher-level actions has a clear beginning and ending point (picking up and putting down the perfume bottle). When thinking about the modes that Olga uses, we find her utilizing the mode of furniture as she is sitting (presumably) in a chair at her dressing table; she utilizes the modes of touch and object handling (picking up, opening, holding, closing and putting down the perfume bottle); she utilizes the mode of smell (sniffing the scent and in particular the mode smell of perfume fragrance); here, she may also use the mode of head movement, moving her nose closer to the perfume bottle. Of course, she is utilizing the mode of posture (sitting in some way), gaze (looking at

the perfume bottle and possibly at a mirror in front of her and thus at herself). She further utilizes the mode of proxemics (to the table, the perfume bottles, and the mirror). All of these modes are used to produce the higher-level action of sniffing perfume. Some are used consecutively, and many are used simultaneously.

While Olga's focus is on the lower-level actions of sniffing perfumes, and each sniff of a scent takes on modal intensity, Olga cannot perform these lower-level actions of sniffing perfume without performing many other lower-level actions, drawing on other modes.

But now, let us move away from Olga for a moment and think about a person who is new to smelling perfume. Let us imagine a young girl is visiting Olga, we shall call her Tatiana. She sneaks into Olga's room and finds the dressing table with many bottles of perfume. Tatiana sits down in Olga's chair, gazes at the perfume bottles, extends her right arm and picks one up. Tatiana feels the delicate carvings in the glass bottle and brings the bottle closer to her face. Looking at it, she now brings her left hand to the top and opens the perfume bottle. Then, Tatiana leans forward a little, at the same time as she brings the perfume bottle closer to her nose. She inhales deeply and begins to cough. At this point, Olga walks into her room and finds Tatiana with the open perfume bottle, coughing. Olga laughs and begins to show Tatiana how to sniff perfume.

What we find in our little imagined story is that Tatiana is learning to perform the higher-level action we call *smell of perfume fragrance*. For this, she utilized the mode of furniture much like Olga does. Tatiana knows how to use chairs and tables, and even though she may not have sat at a dressing table before, she knows just what to do. She has sat in other chairs and at various tables, before, and knows how to act with and through this furniture.

Tatiana also utilizes the mode of object handling (picking up the perfume bottle). But now she is feeling the carved glass, thus is learning a new bit of information in (or for) the mode of touch. When we dwell on this new information that she perceives through the mode of touch for a moment, we can imagine how Tatiana will remember this feel of the perfume bottle. Later, this feeling/touching of the delicate glass carvings may be used to perceive/understand carvings or hard textures in very different actions such as choosing jewellery or picking up expensive glassware at a dinner party. Here, a mode develops (further) through the lower-level action of touching (and feeling) a perfume bottle. This development occurs between Tatiana and the object, the perfume bottle.

But when Tatiana smells the perfume, she performs this action wrongly, inhaling the scent too deeply into her lungs, causing her to cough. As Olga appears in the room, Olga explains and shows Tatiana how to perform this action. Here, learning of a new part of the mode of smell (smell of perfume fragrance) occurs through interaction between Olga and Tatiana. But even as Olga is explaining to Tatiana just how to sniff perfume, Tatiana continues to (likely inadvertently) learn about the mode of touch, holding the different perfume bottles in her hands, feeling the delicacy of the various flasks. Simultaneously, and with each sniff, she learns a little more about (or of) the mode of smell.

conclusion

mode as system of mediated action

In this article, I have taken the mode of smell as my example in order to explicate the definition of the term mode in multimodal mediated research. Mode, conceived of as a system of mediated action with regularities, embeds the irreducible tension between social actor(s) and mediational means; alludes to the fact that modes are learned through concrete lower-level actions; and illustrates that the term mode is merely a theoretical concept that does not exist in the real world, but is heuristically significant for analytical purposes.

explanatory capability

There are three strong explanatory capabilities embedded when defining a mode as a system of mediated action with regularities:

1. Early in the article, I mention that modes, by defining them as systems of mediated action with regularities, allows us to investigate these regularities as residing on a continuum somewhere between the social actor(s) and the mediational means. Sometimes, we will find that the regularities are more embedded within the mediational means and sometimes they are more embedded in the social actors' bodies (Norris, forthcoming).
2. A mode, defined as system of mediated action, develops through concrete lower-level mediated actions taken in the world, i.e.: social actor acting (on a lower-level) with/through mediational means. As in our examples from above, a social actor sniffing perfume (one sniff = lower-level action; perfume = mediational means). Each time a social actor performs the lower-level action of sniffing perfume, the social actor gains experience, building upon the mode smelling perfume fragrance. This mode resides between socio-cultural others, the social actor, and the perfume. Neither of these are prioritised and all embrace the tension existing between social actors and mediational means.
3. As was illustrated with the example of Tatiana above, when a social actor performs actions, utilizing particular modes (for example the mode of touch in the example where Tatiana learns about the glass carvings), the system of mediated action with its regularities is transferrable to other actions (such as touching creases in shells found at the beach). It is this transferability that makes the notion of mode uniquely useful when studying things human. While modes are learned through concrete lower-level actions, they are not limited to the same kind or type of actions.

In this article, I have explicated the definition of mode as a system of mediated action with regularities. I illustrated the concept by taking a perfume blog entry as my starting point, focusing first on the mode of smell, then on an aspect of this mode, the mode that I delineated as smell of perfume fragrance, and then integrated other modes. By moving ostensibly from one mode to many modes, I problematized the notion of mode, discussing that a mode is not the same as a sense; arguing that a theoretical notion cannot have either an affordance or a meaning potential, while objects certainly can; and demonstrating the usefulness of the theoretical and purely heuristic notion of mode for research.

With the three explanatory capabilities outlined in this article, the concept of mode builds a primary notion in multimodal mediated theory. Multimodal mediated theory, which is founded on mediated discourse theory (Scollon, 1998), is the theoretical framework of the methodology multimodal (inter)action analysis, where methodological tools directly link to the conceptualisation of mode as explicated in this article.

But here, I have primarily discussed modes such as smell and touch, which are modes that are based in a sense; I have touched upon the mode of language, an abstract system and the mode of walking, a more concrete system that is strongly linked to the human body. I have alluded to the mode of furniture, a mode that I used to call a disembodied mode (Norris, 2004), and the reader might wonder how a mode defined as a system of mediated action is useful for the analysis of modes that are not directly linked to the human body such as the modes found in web pages on a computer screen. Web pages are, if using my earlier terminology, made up of disembodied modes such as images and written language, moving images and spoken language or music. One may quite wrongly think none of these are linked to the human body. I would like to claim that a web page is only informative when used by a social actor. A social actor makes sense of a web page by looking at it, reading it, listening to it: by using the senses, by drawing on and using the systems of mediated action that the social actor has developed, and by constantly developing and changing these through concrete lower-level actions. A web page itself may afford some possibility for engagement, but a web page, just like perfume, is not used by social actors in a predictable way. Just as some social actors have developed an elaborate system of mediated action that I have called smell of perfume fragrance, and other social actors have developed a modest system, so we will find that some social actors have developed systems of mediated action (or modes) that allow them to engage with a web page quite differently and more comprehensively than others.

My point here is this: When, on the one hand analysing a web page (by itself), a researcher, if interested in how social actors engage with a web page, in fact analyses how they themselves engage with that web page. Such an analysis can be valuable, but it tells us little about how other social actors engage with that same web page. When, on the other hand a researcher is interested in how a web page is constructed and the researcher analyses the web page (by itself), the researcher can analyse the many frozen actions taken by the producers of the web page that are now embedded within the web page. Each lower-level frozen action, an action that was once a concrete real time action performed by the producers, has left physical traces in the web page itself, draws on and builds the producers' mode (a system of mediated action). As long as the researcher has developed

intricate modes that are relevant, and thus can engage in the website at the same level as Olga can smell perfume, then the researcher will come close to an understanding of what the producers of the web page have embedded.

Modes, I suggest, do not exist without social actors. Each mode, as a system of mediated action, comes about through social actors acting with or through a mediational means. Modes, as I say elsewhere (Norris, forthcoming) are made by social actors for social actors' use: Each of us develops modes and in turn uses them; we interact with others, thereby also developing/changing their systems of mediated action, co-creating their modes more similar to ours. Olga has developed the mode smell of perfume fragrance and uses it, constantly developing it further, changing it with every sniff; interacting with others, thereby co-creating their mode of smell of perfume fragrance similar to hers. Looking at modes in this way, we can begin to analyse how there are individual differences as well as modal overlap. We can also become very clear that the objects in the world, the settings, or the web pages are infused with socio-cultural histories and with possibilities to act with and through. However, how social actors use these objects, settings, or web pages, depends upon the social actors' modal development.

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